DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 178 CS 506 007

AUTHOR Thorpe, Judie Mosier
TITLE Lee Iacocca and the Generation of Myth in the Spokesman Advertising Campaign for Chrysler from 1980-1984.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987). For a related document, see CS 506 008.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrators; Advertising; Business; *Commercial Television; Communication Research; Marketing; *Mythology; *Organizational Communication; *Television Commercials; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS American Dream; *Chrysler Corporation; Heroes; *Iacocca (Lee)

ABSTRACT

Applying knowledge of myth to the milieu of commercial television programming, this paper focuses on the way myth was generated in an advertising campaign that featured Lee Iacocca, chief executive officer of Chrysler Corporation, during the period of 1979-1982, when Chrysler moved from the edge of bankruptcy to financial stability. After providing an overview of the topic of myth, the paper examines the messages in the Iacocca advertisements and shows that the underlying theme of each was that Chrysler was fighting to save the American Dream and that Iacocca was leading that fight. The paper next analyzes how Iacocca emerged as an American hero as a result of the myth perpetuated by his media image. Finally, it argues that the generation of myth in the spokesman advertisements has provided the United States with a new myth, the restoration of the American Dream, as well as support for the notion that modern media can help further the study of myth from an ancient perspective to a modern format. (The paper includes a table summarizing the content of the Iacocca commercials and a three-page bibliography.) (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

LEE IACOCCA AND THE GENERATION OF MYTH IN THE SPOKESMAN ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN FOR CHRYSLER FROM 1980-1984

by

Judie Mosier Thorpe
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

presented

Friday, November 6, 1987
Media Forum
Speech Communication Association
Boston, Massachusetts

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Judith M. Thorpe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about myth over the past two thousand years. However, this forum has provided an opportunity to apply knowledge of myth to the very contemporary milieu of commercial television programming. This essay, in particular, will focus upon how myth was generated in an advertising campaign. Specifically, this paper will address the spokesman advertising campaign that featured Lee Iacocca, the Chief Executive Officer of Chrysler, during the years 1979 through 1982. That period is of interest for a number of reasons, but most notably is that era in Chrysler's history will be known as the time when the corporation went from the brink of bankruptcy to financial viability. The time also starts with Iacocca's taking over Chrysler and spans the period from the start of his presidency to the repayment of the government loans, seven years before they were due. This essay will provide an overview of myth. Next, it will project the generation of myth in the spokesman advertisements. Third, an analysis of how Lee Iacocca emerged an American hero as a result of the myth perpetuated by his media image. Finally, it will argue

how the generation of myth in the spokesman advertisements has provided America with a new myth, the restoration of the American dream.

UNDERPINNING THE CONCEPT OF MYTH

Thomas A. Bailey, Byrne Professor of American History, Ermeritus at Stanford University, one of the most consistent and articulate spokesman on the topic of myth in American history, has argued that historical myths and legends are needful in establishing national identity and stimulating patriotic pride. (Cords, 1973, p. 2) Bailey has further suggested that television, in more ways than, has helped to refocus our view of American history. Adding to this notion, Jacques Waardenburg has established that symbols are important to the development of myth:

> Within the broad field of human communication, whether between cultures, communities, or individual persons, the particular signs and stories which we nowadays call symbols and myths have probably always existed....Since myth has the form of a story, it seems to be more accessible and can be approached more straightforwardly and naively than a symbol. (Olson, 1980, p. 41 and 61)

Therefore, the myth incorporates symbols to advance a story. Yet, the story of mythic origin has an oral

tradition. Frank McConnell puts the oral creation of myth in the following way:

> We know what the myth means....it is a kind of predisposition toward meaning, a verbal prima materia where narrative and order, drama and metaphysics, the aboriginally linguistic and the insuperably unspeakable all dance together in the moment before all other moments of human utterance. Myth is not about, it is that precarious energy-exchange between self and other, language and silence, word and world which...is the explosive origin of speech. (Doty, 1986, pp. 246-7).

Therefore, myth is about oral speech that has roots in the culture that proceeded it. But furthermore, Martin S. Day asserts that myth is believed with profound intensity. He argues that ultimately it is not the substance of the narrative that makes a myth, but the burning conviction of teller and listener. (Dody, 1984, p. 16).

THE GENERATION OF MYTH IN IACOCCA'S SPOKESMAN ADS

If, indeed, myth is an oral tranmission of the narrative of our culture, how then does Lee Iacocca generate myth in Chrysler's advertising campaign from 1979 through 1982. The answer can best be reached by examining the main message in each of the ads of that

period. Table One summarizes the content of the advertisments of this time period.

TABLE ONE

Appendix Number	Year	Media	Message
A	1979	TV	Inflation harms
B	1979	TV	Inflation harms
C	1979	Radio	Chrysler can make it if the consumer compares
D	1979	Radio	Same as C
E	1979	Magazine	Chrysler sales up
F	1979	Newspaper	U.S. needs Chrysler
G	1980	TV	Yankee ingenuity is alive and well
H	1980	TV	America is taking a beating at gas pump
I	1980	TV	Chrysler is in business to stay
J	1980	TV	Same as I
K	1980	TV	Chrysler has obligation to make it
L	1980	Radio	High interest keep consumers from buying cars
M	1980	Magazine	Chrysler has better mileage than imports
N	1980	Magazine	Chrysler has 10 billion miles experience than Toyota or Datsun
O	1980	Magazine	Same as N
P	1980	Magazine	Chrysler has guarantee that Toyota, Datsun and Honda does not have
Q	1980	Magazine	Plymouth preferred to Datsun 41 to 9
R	1980	Newspaper	Chrysler announces guarantees
S	1981	TV	Sticker shock
T	1981	TV	High interest rates
U	1981	Radio	American car buyer jolted by sticker shock
V	1981	Radio	Chrysler building quality cars
W	1981	Magazine	Same as V
X	1982	TV	Quality
Y	1982	TV	Made in America
Z	1982	Newspaper	If you can find a better car, buy it
AA	1982	Magazine	Same as X and Z

Three separate themes emerge from this campaign that underpin the generation of myth. First, inflation is hurting the American consumer. Second, Chrysler is trying to stay in business by providing quality cars. Third, Chrysler cars are made in America and are better than the imports. Taken together, these three themes project a narrative that can best be expressed by saying that Chrysler was trying to counter the notion that the American dream was no longer a viable myth. Chrysler faced considerable problems .The economic situation described by Stuart shows the backdrop upon which this myth had fallen victim:

> America's competitive edge in the world marketplace was slipping. Vehicle sales were falling off and hundreds of thousands of workers were thrown out of work: the automobile economy had ground to a halt and corporate losses were running at a record level. (pp. 10-11)

The problems Chrysler faced were mirrored by the American public. Those problems, in regard to their lives in general, and their automobiles, in specific were (1) inflation; (2) high interest rates; (3) inefficiency; (4) high cost; (5) poor quality.

What Chrysler and Iacocca did by focusing upon the specific content they did in the spokesman advertisements was to face this troubled milieu directly. This image of the American dream and hero construct is found in the advertising campaign by what

Iacocca articulated about Chrysler, the company, and regarding how these American made cars met the needs of the beleagured consumer. In sum, Iacocca 'retrofitted" Chrysler's image as one that provided the consumer an answer to their problem.

The fear was that the American dream of a chicken in every pot and a car in every driveway may not continue, particularly if Chrysler were not to survive. Iacocca addresses the fears of the late 70s and early 80s. In sum, the American consumer had worked hard, kept his or her nose to the grindstone and he or she was faced with the loss of a job, high prices, high interest rates and assorted and sundry economic woes that eroded the American dream that has forged our countries hope for over two hundred years. If Chrysler fell, a ripple effect might thrust the American worker into a maelstrom of insecurity. The enemy had the face of the oil glutted sheik and the efficient, foreign worker. Each threatened the security of the worker and therefore the American dream, which had survived the Depression of the 30s and the recessions of more recent years. What story is communicated during these four years of Chrysler spokesman advertisements? Simply stated, Iacocca takes over a company that could best be compared to Washington's rag-tag soldiers at Valley Forge and

through perservance, hard work and well-designed battle plans, they go to war. This army with Iacocca as general fights the battle against the enemy of potential bankruptcy for the company as well as high interest rates, the OPEC crisis and inflation for the consumer. Ultimately, the Chrysler troops save the company, many jobs and re-win the day for the American dream. The advertising campaign chronicles this battle and ultimate victory of the American Dream. As such, Iacocca took on the persona of an American hero.

IACOCCA AS THE HERO OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Lee Iacocca has been called a "national folk hero," "an American legend, a media celebrity, a newsmaker," a "real world Rocky," and an "Indiana Jones" type of hero.[1] A 1985 national poll found that Iacocca appealed broadly to potential voters of the white-middle-class regardless of party affiliation (Cheyfitz, p. 10). Levin (1985), reflecting upon the poll results, notes:

> Nothing about the response to Lee Iacocca in our poll is more remarkable than the broad spectrum of his support...How is it that Lee Iacocca could garner the adulation of both the rich and the poor; labor and management? For Michigan's AFL-CIO chair, Sam Fishman, the answer is easy, "Iacocca," he explains, " is an American success story, and Americans love a winner." (PP. 61-62)

How, then to explain this "American success story"--a man who captured public attention when he assumed command of a large, nearly-bankrupt corporation and who now is viewed by some as potential presidential timber (Iacocca, 1984)? Some popular media attribute Iacocca's success to his ability to manage. For example, Anderson (1985) writes, "[U]nlike most video-generated celebrities, Iacocca was not famous for being famous: he had done something....He managed to whip a sprawling company into shape, and saved American autoworkers' jobs by the tens of thousands" (p. 32). Others attribute Iacocca's success to his straightforwardness and honesty (Poindexter, 1983; Stuller, 1984).

As Brown (1980) notes, "When a communicator exemplifies these values [the components of the American dream] in detail, he becomes a mythic national hero, believable because he is most symbolically one with the national eidolon..." (pp. 9-10). Nimmo and Combs (1970) explain, "What typifies these mythical heroes of real life typifies thoses of fiction as well-that is, each one sets out on a quest destined to produce risks, anxieties, threats, and dangers" (p. 232). Nimmo and Combs (1970) provide a list of specific charactersitics of the American hero seeking to restore Paradise:

> First, the hero is often one of obscure and mysterious origin...Reflect on how many aspiring politicians point to their humble origins...
>
> A hero hears the call, that is, the hero takes up the quest out of urgent necessity...
>
> The hero has a goal....
>
> But all heroic quests are risky. Dangers, loneliness, and temptation abound along the way.
>
> What makes the hero's quest an epic tale is that at some point in the journey, the hero descends into darkness....[T]he hero suffers a crushing blow of some type that symbolizes the same sin that the Edenic community has gone through with the fall from grace.
>
> But the truly heroic figures survive these lonely descents to emerge from the darkness transformed. (pp. 232-236)

Lee Iacocca, a first-generation American of humble immigrant origins, received the call. As the story goes, he set out on a quest of urgent necessity--rescuing Chrysler from the brink of disaster. Iacocca's goal, rebuilding Chrsyler, was a risky goal because should he be unsuccessful, he would be forever associated with the collapse of the tenth largest corporation. Further, if Chrysler could not achieve the American dream, how could the individual American? For in the stories, the myth, Americans tell themselves, corporations are individuals (Robertson, 1980). Robertson (1980) explains that over time Americans extended the dream to include corporation: "The powerful myths of individualism, with their emphasis on independence, the pursuit of happiness, the acquisition of property and wealth, and on success, became the most important part of corporate mythology"(p. 174). He

further explains, "Admiration for the great mythical corporation grew because Americans assumed that at the center of [the corporation] was the single eye, the single controlling brain--the greedy and ambitious, hard-working and indepedent single American individual" (p. 177). This leads Robertson, then to link the corporation with the components of the American dream:

> In the mythology of corporations, every great giant corporation has been <u>created</u> by a single individual....The great corporation then becomes, in the logic of the myth, the living, <u>immortal</u> extension of all the characteristics and dynamics which belonged to the individual who created it....The individual is living metaphor for the corporation; and, in the peculiar way of myths, the corporation has become a metaphor for the individual. (p. 177)

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the advertising campaign that featured Lee Iacocca as spokesman for Chrysler Corporation from 1979 through 1982 generated and perpetuated the myth of the American Dream. The thread that is woven through the campaign is that Chrysler works hard, builds quality cars, meets foreign competition head on and survives. As a private persona, but one who represented the corporation as CEO, Iacocca became an American hero. Although it is appropriate to suggest Iacocca may represent the classic hero or the American general i.e. Washington or Eisenhower going to battle, the image really is broader. As stated

previously, Iacocca has been referred to as an Indiana Jones and a modern-day Rocky by the news media. In sum, he represents an archetype that can best be described as the American underdog winning the battle of preserving the American dream. As such, Iacocca's image is one that a general audience can identify with and can individually apply a myth, legend or story that best fits their images and attitudes. This analysis best explains Iacocca's broad appeal.

Interestingly enough, as we view Iacocca six years removed from the payback of the loans, we realize that the American public has transformed their corporate hero into potential presidential timber. Just as post WWII audiences translated their hero, Eisenhower, into a presidential candidate, many Americans have suggested a similiar role for Iacocca. We need our heroes to inspire us. As Gerald White Johnson wrote in American Heroes and Hero Worship, "Heroes are created by popular demand, sometimes out of the scantiest materials. As Gordon concludes, "In Lee Iacocca's case, style and substance sprang from solid materials, waiting to be applied at the right moment. (Gordon, 1985, p. 176) Iacocca and the spokesman advertisements for Chrysler provide an continuation of our American myth. Finally, as an oral form, they provide one item of support that

suggests the modern media, in this case, an advertising campaign, can help further our study of myth from an ancient perspective to a modern format.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express her appreciation and note that many of the ideas on the myth originated with Susan Opt Whitlock of Ohio State University. Additionally, James A. Benson of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh was helpful in analysis of the narrative developed in the advertising campaign.

NOTES

[1]Poindexter, 1983, p. 56; Alpern, 1984, p. 50; Gordon, 1985, p. 175.

REFERENCES

Alpern, D. (1984, October 8). Behind the Wheels. Newsweek, 15, pp.50-51.

Anderson, K. (1985), April 1). A Spunky Tycoon Turned Superstar. Time, pp. 30-39.

Brown, W. R. (1970) Imagemaker: Will Rogers and the American Dream. Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press.

Brown, W. R. (1982, February) Attention and the Rhetoric of Social Intervention. The Quarterly Journal of Speech, pp. 17-27.

Campbell, Joseph, Editor. (1970) Myths, Dreams, and Religion. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

Cheyfitz, K. (1985, September). Who for President? Metropolitican Detroit, pp. 10-12.

Cords, Nicholas and Patrick Gerster. (1973) Myth and the American Experience. New York: Glencoe Press.

Doty, William G. (1986) Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals. The University of Alabama Press.

Fiske, John. (1873). Myths and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions. Boston: John R. Osgood and Company.

Gallup Polls. (1979-1983) Willmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc.

Gordon, M. (1985). The Iacocca Management Technique: A Profile of the Chrysler Chairman's Unique Key to Business Success. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.

Iacocca, Lee with Novak, W. (1984) Iacocca: An Autobiography. Toronto: Bantam Books.

Iacocca, Lee. (1979). Statement before the Subcommittee on Economic Stabilization, Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs, United States House of Representatives, Ninety-Sixth Congress. First Session on H. R. 5805.

Levin, H. (1985), September). Lee in '88: The New Model President? Metropolitan Detroit, pp. 60-65.

Nimmo, D. and Combs, J. (1980) Subliminal Politics. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice -Hall, Inc.

Nimmo, D. and Combs, J. (1983) Mediated Political Realities. New York: Longman, Inc.

Olson, Alan M., Editor. (1980) Myth, Symbol, and Reality. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press

Patai, Raphael. (1972) Myth and Modern Man. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Poindexter, J. (1983, August). Voices of Authority: New Research Shows that when the CEO Pitches, People Buy. Psychology Today, pp. 53-61.

Robertson, J. O. (1980). American Myth, American Reality. New York: Hill & Wang.

Stuart, R. (1980). Bailout: America's Billion Dollar Gamble on the 'New Chrysler Corporation. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Stuller, J. (1984, October). Speaking Out: Lee Iacocca and an American That's Back On It's Feet. The Saturday Evening Post, p. 110.

Thorpe, J. (1986). The Role of Persuasion for a Corporate Spokesman: An Analysis of the Arguments Lee Iacocca Presented on Behalf of Chrysler Corporation to the American Consumer and to the Congress from 1979 to 1982. Unpublished Dissertation. The Ohio State University.